

Western Rattlesnake

Description:

Idaho's only dangerously venomous snake species is the western rattlesnake. When they rattle, the tail vibrations are very fast with twitches of 20-100 times per second depending on the temperature; warm snakes rattle faster than cool ones.

Important to Identify

Identifying a rattlesnake can be an important step in avoiding trouble. Western rattlesnakes are easily identified by their broad triangular head with elliptical pupils offset by their narrow neck and the deep pit located between their nostrils and mouth. Colors vary among subspecies, but they are generally green, tan, or gray; have large, rounded blotches along the back, and black and white crossbars on the tail. The scales on its belly are generally a solid cream or yellow. Rattles are conspicuous on the tail and often give it a blunt-ended appearance. Young snakes have a 'button' on their tail before they develop their rattle.

Western rattlesnakes are the most heavy-bodied snake in Idaho. They can reach sizes of up to about 65 inches in total length. Depending on their age and health, rattlesnakes often shed their skin, sometimes up to three times a year. A new rattle segment is added every time a snake sheds its skin.

The elliptical pupils of western rattlesnakes help distinguish it from gopher snakes. Gopher snakes have round pupils. Because you probably don't want to get close enough to look a snake in the eye to identify it, remember that gopher snakes also lack a rattle at the end of their tail and usually have a thinner head. Gopher snakes often occupy the same habitat as rattlesnakes but are non-venomous.

Where Will I See A Rattlesnake? The only time you will see a rattlesnake during the day is during cool spring and fall weather. They are nocturnal and/or crepuscular (active in morning and late afternoon) in hot, summer weather. The primary habitat for the western rattlesnake is a dry region with little vegetation. If you can identify areas where rattlesnakes might be, it will be easier to avoid them. Also, when you do see a rattlesnake, remember that a snake's first instinct is to run away, then to defend itself. Usually, you will receive a warning before a snake strikes and you can take this opportunity to move away from the snake.

Variety

Western rattlesnakes have the most variable diet of any rattlesnake in North America. Usually going two weeks between meals, rattlesnakes only eat when they are hungry. They mostly eat small mammals, but reptiles, amphibians, and bird eggs are also consumed. Selection of prey is limited to the size of what can easily be swallowed, so in some regions, juveniles prey mostly on lizards rather than on small mammals. Prey size increases as the snakes grow. In southwestern Idaho, adult snakes prefer mice, wood rats, ground squirrels and rabbits.

Predators

Raptors, especially red-tailed hawks and golden eagles prey upon western rattlesnakes, as do coyotes. However, more snake deaths occur from accidents that involve large animals, such as deer, horses, and members of the cow family (usually trampling), than do deaths from natural predators. In addition, some humans kill rattlesnakes.

Sharp Senses

The deep pit between the western rattlesnake's nostril and mouth is used to detect heat signals from potential prey and gives this group of snakes the common name "pit vipers". The long fangs are hollow and when its mouth is closed, are folded up towards the roof of the mouth. When striking, fangs swing forward to puncture the target and the venom glands allow the venom to enter the attacker or prey. Contrary to popular belief, western rattlesnakes are calm snakes and only rarely rattle, even when approached by potential predators. Instead, they remain still to avoid being seen or heard.

No eggs?

Adult western rattlesnakes reproduce when they are about four to six years old, mating at any time during their active season which is different from other snakes in Idaho. Surprisingly, they do not lay eggs. Instead, they give birth to three to 12 live young called neonates which are born between August and October. Adult females may not give birth every year, but if their fat reserves are high, they may give birth twice a year. The young western rattlesnakes resemble adults except for the button on their tail before a rattle develops.

Hibernation

Western rattlesnakes often hibernate in large numbers, sometimes with other snake species, in mammal burrows, rock crevices, or caves on south-facing slopes. They are active from late March to October in northern Idaho and southern British Columbia, and from about April to November over the majority of their range.

Range/Distribution

The western rattlesnake is the most widely distributed rattlesnake in the western United States and Canada. In Idaho, western rattlesnakes are found everywhere but the northern portion of the state and at high elevations. The western rattlesnake also occurs from southeastern British Columbia through Oregon, into Baja California and Mexico. In Washington, it occurs only east of the Cascade Mountains and into the eastern part of the Columbia River Gorge.



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No Footprint
Footprint

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Distribution Map

1. **Species:** Western Rattlesnake
2. **Scientific Name:** *Crotalus viridis*
3. **Population:**
4. **Size:** Length: 4-5 feet.
5. **Diet:** Mostly small mammals, also reptiles, amphibians, and bird eggs.
6. **Young:** 3-12; called neonates.
7. **Lifespan:** 16-20 years.
8. **Taxonomy:** Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Reptilia
Order: Squamata
Family: Viperidae
9. **Hunted In Idaho:** No
10. **Hunting Link:**